

Boys to good men

Many young males are swayed by toxic online messages of what it is to be a man. Now there are moves to show them a different path, one which embraces vulnerability, empathy and respectful relationships.

BY SARAH CATHERALL • ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANTHONY ELLISON

Chris seems to have it all sorted: at 21, he's a finance student, a successful football player and a model. But he looks at the male sports and fitness influencers he follows on social media and to him, they seem to be more successful or having a better time than he is.

It was worse when he was at secondary school, where he battled dark times. Living at home in Auckland's Parnell, he felt like he was failing compared with others and had no one to talk to. Friends would listen, but the usual response was, "Head up, man".

His father – a traditional Italian – didn't want to know his son was struggling. Says Chris, "You look at other people and compare yourself and you think: I should have more things figured out."

Who did he turn to? Chris (a pseudonym) scrolled online and was drawn to messages espoused by the self-proclaimed misogynist influencer Andrew Tate – an American-born kickboxer who has accumulated millions of followers on social media for dismissing feminism and talking up ultra masculinity.

Currently facing sexual aggression and human trafficking charges in Romania with his brother Tristan, Tate, who claims to be a billionaire, defends the patriarchy and argues that you have to work hard to succeed.

Chris was drawn to Tate's philosophy of hard work and self-improvement, and agrees with a lot of his ideas. Asked, though, about Tate's anti-feminism, he says, "Some of his ideas have been taken out of context."

But as Chris pulls on his running shoes and heads out for a weekend jog, his take-away thought – and one of the reasons he's keen to talk today – is that young males should be careful and critical about who they follow and listen to online.

MISOGYNY & THE MANOSPHERE

The story about young males in New Zealand today is complex. Aotearoa has one of the highest suicide rates for young men in the Western world; young men are more likely to skip and fail school, and they're more likely to be depressed, anxious and suicidal.

Over the past decade, a number of high-profile sexual harassment cases involving young Kiwi men have sparked official investigations. One of the most infamous was 2013's "Roast Busters": young males who were accused of intoxicating underage girls to gang-rape them. Ten years later, two men were sentenced to home detention. Police identified 35 young men as "persons of interest" during their investigation.

In 2017, two Wellington College students posted jokes on a private Facebook page about taking advantage of drunk girls, sparking protests at Parliament. Two years ago, a Christchurch Girls' High School survey found more than a quarter of the students had been sexually harassed and 20 had been raped, many without reporting it. And the toxicity is not the domain of just teens: last year, the predatory Christchurch brothers Roberto, 38, and Danny Jaz, 40, were jailed on 69 charges, including rape and stupefying, against eight women they'd encountered through Mama Hooch, the bar owned by their father.

Critics talk about the pervasive culture of masculinity, which prizes wealth, sexual and

sporting prowess, success and stoicism at the expense of emotions, vulnerability and empathy. At its most extreme, misogynistic extremism can lead to devastating violence. Although the motivations of mentally ill Bondi murderer Joel Cauchi died with him, his apparent targeting of women as his victims and the comment from his mother that "he wanted a girlfriend and he's got no social skills" bring together troubling threads. There are calls for a royal commission in Australia after a sharp rise in male violence against women, including 27 killings so far this year, prompted nationwide protests.

Around New Zealand, a number of men – headmasters, academics, social activists and students themselves – are trying to change the narrative. Their mission is to steer young males away from the "manosphere" of algorithm-driven toxic influencers, porn sites and message boards that promote "traditional" masculinity and attack feminism, turning them instead to become men who show their emotions, open up to their parents and mates, and have healthy, respectful relationships with females.

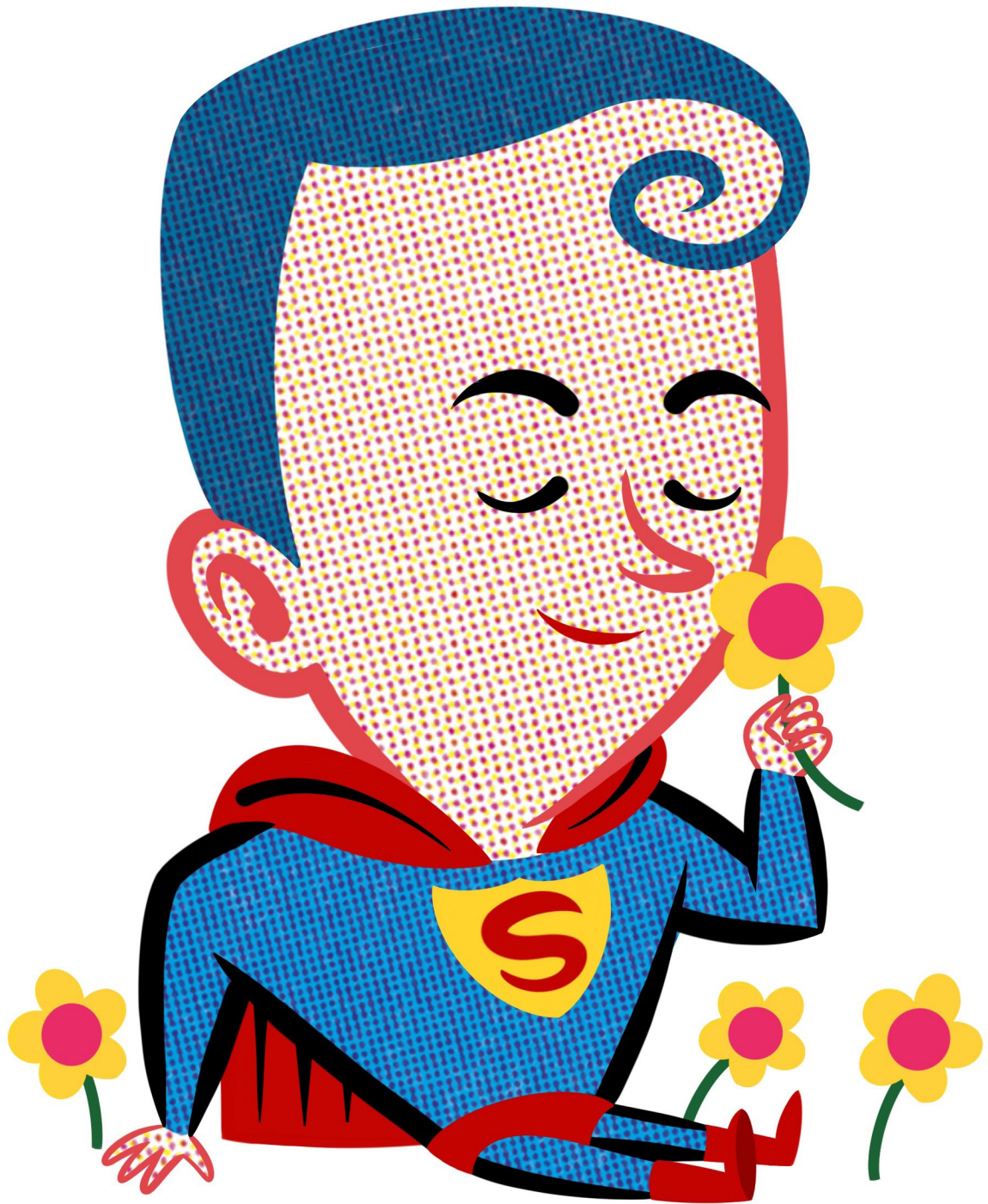
ANTI-FEMINIST IDEAS

In Wellington in March, University of Auckland psychology researcher Dr Kris Taylor stood in a Victoria University lecture theatre, a speaker at "Talking Masculinity". Funded through the government's post-Christchurch mosque attack anti-violence fund, Taylor was flanked by two global leaders in masculinity studies: Dr Luc Cousineau, an expert in men's rights activism from the University of Waterloo, Canada, and London-based Maeve Park, who researches and delivers workshops on the manosphere to UK organisations, schools and government officials.

Participants, many of them secondary school teachers, listened as Cousineau



Toxic influencers and porn sites promote 'traditional' masculinity and attack feminism.



talked about why young males are drawn to far-right, anti-feminist ideas – his research specialty. “A lot of it is fear. What’s my life going to look like? What does it mean to be a man? Am I going to have power and privilege? Am I going to be like my dad or not like my dad? [It’s] that fear and then lack of social connection, loneliness, that pushes particularly young men in that direction.”

Taylor, who took the same talk to Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin, pulled up

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slides showing some of the manosphere’s key American influencers. Along with Andrew Tate, there is Sneako (a pro-Tate streamer), Pearl Davis (an anti-feminist and anti-Semitic YouTuber, who said last year that women shouldn’t vote), Adin Ross (homophobic), and Brian Atlas (founder of an anti-women dating podcast, @Whatever).

As Wellington teachers listened, Taylor pointed out that many parents and educators have no idea that young Kiwi men

From top: Psychology researcher Kris Taylor; educator Richie Hardcore; US academic and author Andrew Reiner.

are being sucked in by these dangerous messages.

“We need to emphasise the seriousness of it,” Taylor said. “There can be a perception that, ‘Oh, it’s just the internet, and there’s a sort of amorphous thread out there, but we don’t really know what it is.’”

“But this stuff can be dangerous. Along with the violent ends of the spectrum, there’s harassment and stalking of girls in the manosphere, and pressures on boys to achieve a certain body image.”

Taylor is well versed in not just the manosphere but also the deeper thoughts of today’s teenage boys through his involvement in *Shifting the Line*, an Auckland University study led by psychology professor Nicola Gavay. Coming after the rape culture protests triggered by the Wellington College group, the study asked 16- and 17-year-old boys to think about what it means to be a man, and to encourage them to learn to reject some of masculinity’s worst traits.

Even though Gen Z males might be more progressive and open to diversity than a decade ago, Taylor says “the pressures still exist, because we still live in a society where norms about masculinity are the same as they were 40 years ago”.

At any workshop, he asks boys what pressures they feel as males. “We still have a pervasive problem of expectations to be hard, and expectations to suppress their emotions.”

At their extreme, he thinks these expectations contribute to poor mental health and suicidal thoughts or behaviour.

“Young males want to fit in. Boys police other boys’ behaviour in ways that they don’t even recognise, through teasing and banter. That can be good fun and funny, but it also sends very clear messages about how to conform.”

“So much about being a teenage boy is conforming to a norm. It’s the idea of a very tight-knit, male-centric peer environment where boys are testing out ideas.”

Men struggle to have deep friendships where they can open up, says Taylor. They might joke and banter, but when it comes to talking about hard stuff, they can struggle, unless they’re in crisis mode.

Females have more outlets to talk and open up. Although their pressure to conform is even more overt – body shape, looks, presentation – they’re allowed



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to be sad, dramatic and vulnerable.

Not so for males. “With a lot of male relationships in this country, there’s not that middle ground where you can decompress and talk through your feelings when you’re having a bit of a shit time,” says Taylor.

During his *Talking Masculinity* presentation, Taylor shared Post-it notes written by male students. A 17-year-old wrote: “Boys are told what they shouldn’t be more than what they should be.” A 16-year-old: “Guys don’t really talk about break-ups or their feelings because you don’t want to be seen as weak to your friends.” A 15-year-old: “Men are judged on their wealth and status a lot more than girls so it’s important to make good money or you won’t find a girl.”

Some of the Post-it notes showed insight: “You’re expected to act tough, be incredibly muscley, have a car, get with heaps of women”. Some sounded straight from the Andrew Tate playbook: “Boys just wanna smash [have sex] and can’t foster a platonic friendship with a woman.”

CHANGING STEREOTYPES

Retired Muay Thai champion Richie Hardcore isn’t fighting in the ring any more. A former ambassador for the White Ribbon anti-violence campaign, he’s shifted his fight to expanding the traditional definitions of masculinity. The 44-year-old social activist sees the manosphere – and toxic influencers like Tate – as dangerous, but the extreme.

“There are plenty of unhealthy drivers of stereotypical masculinity outside of the manosphere,” says Hardcore. “Pornography, mainstream music, advertising and the stories our peers and families can tell are promoting an unhealthy idea of masculinity, along with social media.”

Hardcore, who works in family-violence prevention, has been going into schools and organisations for the past few years to spread the message that we need to redefine masculinity: telling males they don’t have to be tough, wealthy and successful to fit in or prove they’ve made it;



that they can be good friends, good fathers.

He recently hosted a masculinity workshop for young male kickboxers and fighters in Auckland. As part of the day, he talked of men who inspire him, citing mixed martial artist Kai-Kara France and former boxer Junior Fa, among others. Those sort of guys, he told them, should be their influencers and role models – talented at sport, but also “a good father, respectful husband and loving partner”.

He also introduced former champion kickboxer Jason Suttie to the group. Now 50 and a father of four, Suttie opened up about his own emotional growth. As a kid, Suttie expressed himself by fighting with other kids. It wasn't until he turned 30

that he cried for the first time. Suttie, who earned six world titles, thought crying was a sign of weakness. “I had to hold my tears back because I didn't want to be called a crybaby or a poofter or whatever,” he tells the *Listener*.

“I realised when I cried that it didn't make me weak and that a man can be soft and kind



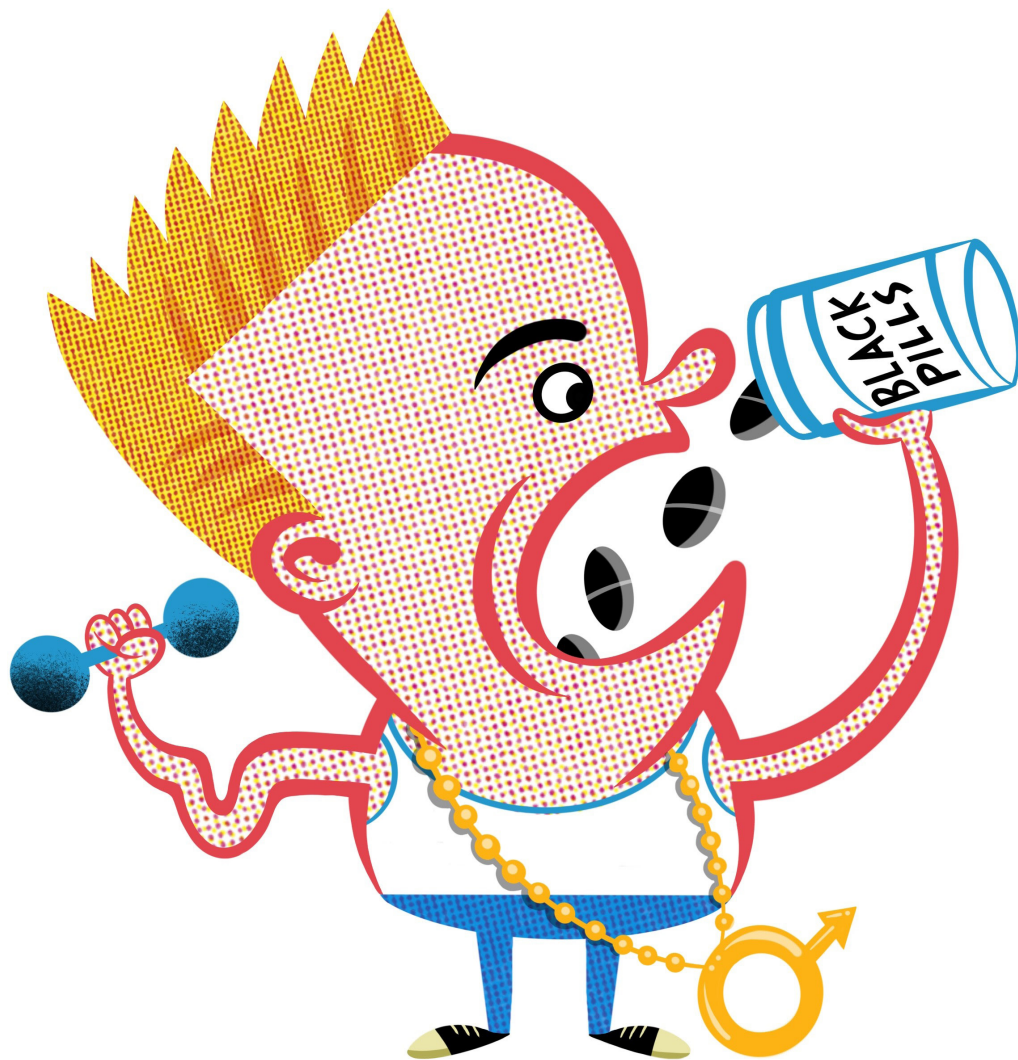
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and emotional. I think we need to have these conversations.”

DANGEROUS NARRATIVES

In July, US academic Andrew Reiner will visit New Zealand to talk to six boys' schools. Boys of all ages are feeling alienated and disconnected, says Reiner, author of 2020's *Better Boys, Better Men: The New Masculinity That Creates Greater Courage and Emotional Resiliency*.

“The ways we still raise boys to ‘succeed’ as burgeoning men no longer work,” he says. “The proof is in the statistics of their struggles and failure in education, their alcohol and substance abuse, their untreated mental health struggles, their loneliness and



alienation, their willingness to prove their male competency with unchecked violence and their runaway suicide rates.”

Reiner argues that we “empower and encourage girls to be whoever and whatever they want to be – which is great – because many parents and educators believe it will only help girls compete and succeed. And we give them emotionally generative support.”

But Reiner’s research tells him that the positive messages for girls are not replicated for boys. Instead, one of the most dangerous narratives is one that many here are trying to rewrite.

“One of the most devastating pressures older boys and young men still experience is to be considered ‘competent’ men – to handle their problems and challenges on their own. This, by the way, is one of the few old-school masculinity traits all boys and young men still feel pressure to practise.”

Young men absorb messages that they need to excel at sport, boast six-pack abs,

be sexually active with “lots of girls”, and be ready to turn violent if they’re disrespected. If they struggle with these cultural expectations, Reiner says, showing their emotions and seeking help are seen as a sign of weakness. “Traditional masculine identity teaches men to tough out these deep feelings that get them feeling down.”

CULTURAL SHIFT

At Westlake Boys High School on Auckland’s North Shore, healthy masculinity and relationship and consent courses are part of the curriculum. Hardcore talked to classes there two years ago and it’s

“**Pornography is everywhere and boys don’t have to source it.**”

one of the six schools Reiner will visit.

Headmaster David Ferguson – also chair of the NZ Association of Boys’ Schools – has been working in boys’ schools for 32 years here and in the UK, the last 14 years at Westlake, which has a roll of 2700 boys.

With so many voices influencing young males on and offline, Ferguson says schools have to offer alternative, healthy perspectives. “There are lots of voices out there that the boys are going to listen to and some will prefer certain points of view to others. We’ve underprotected young people for their online experiences and overprotected them for their real-life experiences.”

Westlake teachers were recently interviewed for a school resource on masculinity. Ferguson was asked what masculinity means to him and says he gave different answers to what he would have said when he was the same age as his students.

He talked about being a good friend and father, being kind, thoughtful and

respectful. As an advocate for and supporter of teenage boys, Ferguson is trying to give them positive role models closer to home. “We’ve got an opportunity spending all day, every day with teenage boys to add to the conversation and talk about what a good man is, and what things they might want to look at when they leave school and become young adults.”

It’s a similar story at Otago Boys’ High School, which has recently joined forces with other Dunedin schools – John McGlashan College, King’s High School and St Hilda’s Collegiate – to talk openly about healthy male-female relationships, sexuality and consent. Otago Boys’ rector Richard Hall says the schools are seeking a cultural shift so males have more respectful and equitable relationships with females. Hall has no idea how much pornography his male students watch, but says it’s endemic.

“Pornography is everywhere, and boys don’t have to source it. It can come to them through Instagram, through Only Fans, [US porn star] Johnny Sins, all of these sorts of influences.”

In April, Hall is bringing in Kris Taylor to survey and talk to his students. He wants to know who they are influenced by on and offline, and how to make them more critically reflective. “We need to listen to them.”

Richie Hardcore ran a workshop at the college two years ago. He went into a Year 10 class and asked the cohort who had heard of Tate. Most of the class put their hands up and a few cheered. Says Hall: “It was quite sobering.” Hall doesn’t judge his pupils: he wants to understand the challenges they face and to guide them. “They are as confused about what being a man is today as anybody else.

“While some of the aspects of traditional manhood are not good, there are other aspects that we can retain, like loyalty, like respect, like courage, which is one of our school values.

“I don’t really think anyone understands the world they inhabit, how it has been accelerated and continues to accelerate at such a great rate.

“What is modern masculinity? That’s the question we’re all grappling with.” ■



Seeking a cultural shift: Richard Hall, top, of Otago Boys’ High, and Association of Boys’ Schools chair David Ferguson.

CHANGING THE LABEL

Students helping each other to redefine being a lad.

ON A WEEKNIGHT, TOM VINCENT visits student flats around Christchurch bearing a sizzling leg of lamb and roast potatoes. The 22-year-old University of Canterbury engineering student heads the not-for-profit, student-led organisation Lads Without Labels. The group was started by Vincent and friends alarmed at the conversations men don’t have with their friends and the not-unconnected suicide rate.



Tom Vincent

The kai is the foot in the door for the mahi: getting young men to open up about what’s really going on and encouraging them to check up on their mates. Over dinner and a “flat chat”, Vincent and the Lads Without Labels volunteers try to get young men talking to one another and to be frank about their mental health. Transitioning to university can be tough, says Vincent; alcohol and drugs are often used to mask difficulties.

Vincent attended Christchurch’s establishment Christ’s College. He learnt there that he should play rugby and row because sports jocks were revered. Getting drunk and getting laid were also ideals fed to him by his peer group and the wider media. And he shouldn’t be too emotional – you can cry at kindergarten and primary school, but you’ve got to toughen up as you progress through the school years.

“There’s a disparity between the mental health of young males and young females and that’s down solely to the fact that young males don’t talk to each other, to friends, to family, or go and seek professional help,” he says. “They deal with stuff inside and it eats away at them.

“When you check up on your mates, the response is often like, ‘Yeah, no, mate, I’m all good.’ Which is the easiest response.

“It’s about trying to teach them to be honest. [So] when someone checks up on you, you say, ‘I’m feeling a bit low and struggling with this and that.’”

Vincent wants men to work on being comfortable with these conversations, “so when stuff does go wrong, you can reach out to your mates”.

Although the name refers to lads, the group has as many female volunteers as males.

“It takes a village to make a shift. We’re trying to create good young men who, once they leave university, become good men. Part of that is having strong, healthy relationships with the females in their lives.”